



SOUTH VALLEY WATER ASSOC

Written testimony of the South Valley Water Association to the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife for the hearing “The State of Water Supply Reliability in the 21st Century”

The South Valley Water Association (SVWA) consists of nine irrigation districts that wield water for agriculture within the Central Valley Project’s (CVP) Friant Division. SVWA represents more than 400,000 acres of the world’s most productive farmland in the southern end of the Great Central Valley of California. Farmers in SVWA grow a diverse group of agriculture commodities including; cotton, grapes, oranges, and a variety of different nuts and dairy products. Collectively, the SVWA irrigation districts deliver up to 1 million acre-feet of water annually to farmers in the Central Valley.

Water supply reliability in the San Joaquin Valley will require robust state, federal and local investment in infrastructure, along with coordinated and balanced approaches to water management to ensure that one of the world’s most productive agricultural regions can continue to provide good jobs and safe, affordable food to all of the United States.

Subsidence

Subsidence is an issue that plagues the entire state of California but nowhere are the impacts as visible as in the San Joaquin Valley. Because of subsidence, the Friant-Kern canal, which relies entirely on gravity to deliver water to communities and a total of 1 million acres of farmland, has lost roughly 60% of its carrying capacity, as the canal has literally sunk into the ground creating pinch points upstream of some of the largest users of water. These pinch points prevent the efficient movement of water and have caused severe economic impacts.

As the state of California moves towards implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), the inability to efficiently move water through the Friant-Kern canal creates significant hurdles as it limits the ability to move water from Millerton Lake through to the southern end of the Friant service area. This part of the San Joaquin Valley has significant groundwater recharge potential, but it can only be fully realized if the infrastructure exists to deliver water during times when excess flows are in the system.

The double-sided impact of subsidence is not just the inability to deliver irrigation and recharge water and gain the resulting benefits, but also that the diversion of that water into the Friant-Kern Canal is also part of mitigating flood impacts on the levy systems below Friant Dam. Subsidence is also not limited to just the Friant-Kern Canal. In 2017, the levies of the lower Kings River had sunk enough that flood releases threatened the communities of Huron and Tranquility. Scenarios like that will continue to play out in the San Joaquin Valley until the impacts of subsidence are addressed.

Multi-Benefit Projects

Farmers in the San Joaquin Valley will inevitably have to fallow land in order to reduce groundwater demand and meet the requirements of SGMA. Because of this, SVWA has developed a unique partnership with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to advance multi-benefit land retirement projects. SVWA and TNC are in the process of implementing a strategic land retirement program to ensure that land retirement is done in a way that minimizes impacts to disadvantaged communities and creates ecosystem benefits. A scattered approach to land retirement will have severe socio-economic impacts and limit habitat connectivity. The program will identify lands for fallowing based on their habitat potential and will create habitat connectivity in a region that has historically been characterized by a checkerboard of farmland and habitat.

Strategically retiring and restoring parts of the farming landscape to natural habitats, as opposed to leaving them fallow and unused or converting them to houses or industrial uses, could significantly increase the potential for recovery of dozens of endangered species in the San Joaquin Valley.

Restoring former agricultural lands to natural habitats can also deliver other environmental benefits that provide tangible services for farmers and San Joaquin Valley residents. Restored lands can be a reservoir of abundant native pollinators needed for crop production and natural enemies of agricultural pests which can reduce the pest burden in many crops. Reducing the agricultural footprint may also help reduce air quality problems that are leading to chronic human health issues in the San Joaquin Valley, like high rates of asthma. Retiring and restoring targeted agricultural areas will create the possibility of reducing overall nitrate loading in groundwater over time that currently affects rural communities and contributes rates of birth defects that are higher than state averages. Further, it could also significantly contribute to helping the state meet its 2030-2050 targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions a potential source of funding for landowners and water agencies to help defray the costs of lost production and restoration.

Healthy Ecosystems

SVWA recognizes that healthier fisheries lead to more reliable water supplies and that the two are not mutually exclusive. Farmers versus fish is a counterproductive approach that only fosters division – the traditional paradigm that more flows lead to more fish hinders progress. Science shows that efforts to improve fish populations should focus on habitat restoration, predator control and functional flows – flows at the right time and place, rather than additional

requirements for minimum instream flows. Efforts to reactivate floodplains for fish in the Sacramento Valley have shown incredible promise and should be replicated on the Lower San Joaquin River.